

# Star Tribune

Established 1867

**Roger Parkinson** Publisher and President

**Joel R. Kramer** Executive Editor

**Tim J. McGuire** Managing Editor

**Robert J. White** Editorial Editor

30A

Sunday/April 30/1989

## Community homes for Minnesota's retarded

Given a choice, not many Minnesotans would elect to live in an institution. Yet 1,400 of the State's mentally retarded citizens do. They are segregated in large state hospitals, far away from the puzzles and pleasures of everyday life. Many would thrive if moved into home-like environments closer to friends and family. A proposal pending in the House would enable such transfers. Lawmakers in both chambers should embrace it.

Years ago, the severely retarded were warehoused state institutions — now called regional treatment centers — on the assumption that most would be unable to cope anywhere else. But experience in Minnesota and other states suggests that most retarded people make great strides when moved from institutions to community group homes. And though some families are skeptical when a transfer first occurs, such opposition usually dissolves after the move is made and benefits become evident.

The bill in the House would harvest those benefits on a grand scale. Sponsored by Rep. Paul Ogren, DFL-Aitkin, it calls for moving nearly all retarded citizens from the state's seven regional treatment Centers into supportive community dwellings of six or fewer residents by mid-1995. Many would transfer to private, state-licensed homes of the sort

already occupied by most retarded Minnesotans. Others would find space in a new state-operated network of group homes and day programs, staffed by workers who now run the state hospitals. About 100 or so medically fragile and highly aggressive patients would remain institutionalized. Ogren's measure calls for \$18 million to launch the program in the coming biennium.

The bill is the product of an ingenious negotiating process engineered by Human Services Commissioner Sandra Gardebring and has won wide support from advocates for the mentally retarded. But a few relatives of hospital residents oppose the transfers, as do some communities that face closure of regional centers. Their complaints have spurred Sen. Don Samuelson, DFL-Brainerd, to pare back the Senate version of Ogren's bill. Samuelson's plan sets no timetable for moving residents from the centers and establishes no ceiling on the number of residents who would stay put.

That approach ignores the flood of evidence showing that the retarded enjoy life most fully not in hospitals, but in specially staffed homes. Their enjoyment can only be cultivated if the state creates the homes and starts arranging transfers. Ogren's bill will prod the state to do just that. It deserves prompt legislative approval.